

Sonnet XXXII

Glossary

thine	your
oath	promise, pledge (of love)
slacken	to relax or loosen
troth	solemn vow, usually to marry
loathe	hate, detest
viol	a stringed instrument, precursor to a violin, popular in the 16 th and 17 th centuries. They had six strings and were played with a curved bow.
wroth	extreme anger
perfect strains	perfect melody, notes
defaced	spoiled, ruined
doat	very fond, extreme devotion (usually <i>dote</i>)

Summary

This sonnet is well-known and revered as both poignant and beautiful. The speaker addresses her betrothed and tells of her first reaction to his proposal of marriage. She was uncertain and saw herself as unworthy of his pledge. She uses an extended simile where she compares herself to a faulty viol and Browning to the player. She is afraid, with one wrong note, the instrument would be found unworthy. Yet the speaker realises she has underestimated the skill of

the player and that he can create perfection from such an instrument.

Discussion

Like her other sonnets this uses the pleasantly simple rhythmic iambic pentameter and the very regular rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan sonnet. It is also written rather simply using a straightforward comparison to represent the persona's feelings.

The poem begins with persona's account of her response to her lover's oath. She is addressing him, speaking of "thine oath". It assumed she speaks of his proposal of marriage as he has clearly told her of his love many, many times before, even in the few in the series of sonnets that are prescribed. Mingled with the tone of amazement and excitement is a clear sense of fear.

The morning after the proposal, "the first time that the sun rose on thine oath", she had doubts and eagerly awaited the moon, which obviously refers to the night. She uses natural images. Here the sun symbolises, in its light and new day image, the new life and new seriousness of their relationship. Yet the desire for the moon sees her wishing for darkness to "slacken all those bonds which seemed too soon". Here the night, which accompanies the moon, gives her shelter from day's glare. The bonds are loosened as she is more alone at night and can feel less tied to her lover. She can also sleep and forget the tumultuous events. Yet the moon also seems to give her comfort, perhaps being personified in a protection role. There is a sense of quiet and clam which she clearly needs as her feelings are in turmoil.

We hear how her concern with the pledge stems from the rapidity of the relationship. She feels it is happening too soon so she doubts "Quick-loving hearts". The use of "I thought" reminds us she is speaking of the past. This was her initial reaction and she may well think differently now. It also hints at her inexperience as "thought" implies only a perspective and we know she has little, if anything, to measure these things by.

The fear she feels is not in the proposal or her acceptance of it. In fact it is the fear for the future that worries her. She is concerned that such swift feelings might as quickly swing the other way and turn negative- "Quick-loving hearts, I thought, may quickly loath". The repetition of "quickly" creates this sense of a pendulum effect. Her fears were exacerbated by the uncharacteristic nature of her reaction to Browning. She does not seem the type to readily fall in love so the speed of this relationship would shock her.

This dread is intensified by her self doubts. She believes herself unworthy of Browning's love:

*And looking at myself, I seemed not one
For such a man's love!*

Her reference to him as "such a man" reflects her awe of him. To Barrett Browning he is too magnificent and esteemed to be really able to be satisfied by her. This is ironic considering at the time, Barrett Browning was a successful poet. Later in their relationship Browning himself was scorned as people said he was trying to borrow her fame to boost himself.

She goes on to liken herself to an out-of-date, out of tune instrument. A viol was an old instrument even in the nineteenth century. She is hinting at her age here. She

speaks of how a singer would snatch it when in a hurry but then be disillusioned and "lay it down at the first ill-sounding note". Here she alludes to her ill-health and the perceived rapidity of the relationship. So she casts herself as inadequate to fulfil or complement an artist, which is, of course, how she sees Browning. The use of the word, "defaced" has connotations of ugliness and irreparable ruin. Her low self esteem and chronic fear of being put aside and perhaps, her expectation of it, is obvious and quite sad.

Yet she continues to say she was wrong – not about herself but about her assumptions about the artist:

*I did not wrong myself so, but I placed
A wrong on thee.*

Sadly, she is saying she believes she was right about her own inadequacy but that the player, Browning, was more accomplished than she realised. The italics used for "*thee*" are used to emphasise her surprise that she had underestimated him. You might decide the italics reflect her jubilation that there is hope for the relationship. She is admiring of the skill of the player that he can generate "perfect strains" and that "Neath master=hands" even a ruined instrument can create sublime harmony. It is no accident that she has chosen a viol. Not only was it antiquated but with six strings it was very difficult to play. The skill of the musician is emphasised by the complexity of the instrument choice. Hence this is a very positive image about the music which would symbolise their relationship.

Many see this realisation as a very positive sign for the success of the union. The "perfect strains" equate to their perfect love which she sees as complete and beyond the ordinary. However, the image is absolutely deprecating for Barrett Browning herself. She sees that he compensated for

her shortfall with his brilliance. She still depicts her self as flawed, old and broken.

The final line refers to the nature of that love. She continues the simile of the player and the viol referring to the "stroke" - "And great souls, at one stroke, may do and doat". One stroke of the strings from such a master can create "great souls" which can act and are devoted. Here the action implies the marriage which begins the sonnet. Remember this is a huge action as it is a union forever in God's eyes – this was what marriage was to the religious Victorian. The spiritual aspect of their love is reflected in the reference to "great souls", especially when we think back to Sonnet XXII.

Furthermore, since this spiritual connection is possible "at one stroke" it is implied that the relationship, although involving, "Quick-loving hearts", is not superficial as she feared. It is Browning who has the power in this sonnet. He is the wielder of the almost magical ability to create the sublime from nothing. It is has a religious resonance (think fishes and loaves) and reminds us how she believes Browning was responsible for her own resurrection from a death in life.

You may not see the poem this way. Many have decided it is a sonnet that is dominated by her guilt and regret about the love. They argue the sonnet shows Barrett Browning's remorse that she is not good enough for her fiancé. Some see she feels guilty about agreeing to marry a man of which she is unworthy. The poem is seen to express her sadness of the ultimate failure of the relationship – that she cannot see any success because of her flaws. There are some problems with this reading. While she clearly presents herself as undeserving, she seems accept her failings without question and the poem moves to glorify Browning. I am not convinced her focus is entirely herself. Also the final

lines seem to celebrate the love that he can manage. I cannot see the negative picture of their marriage.

Nevertheless, it is important you decide how you see the poem and be able to substantiate your response. I see the poem ending with a sense of resolution and hope for the future.

Ideas

The power of love

Barrett Browning quite cleverly presents herself in the worst possible light in this poem. Yet despite her flaws, the love that Browning elicits is pure and powerful. Here she gives the power to her lover but the notion that it is love that helps bring her from darkness has not changed. She depicts her past as old, decrepit and dark by comparing herself to an antiquated instrument and desiring the night.

Love is uplifting and the religious elevation of Browning is an effective way to show the power of love in his hands. He is the supreme craftsman. There is the recognition that love can be swift. It is so powerful that it can take individuals by surprise. The simile of the viol also shows the power of love. The instrument is old and worn-out – a parallel to Barrett Browning's age and ill-health but the notes within can be pure if nurtured properly. Hence Barrett Browning's spiritual worth is revealed through the power of love.

Love provides hope

Barrett Browning is clear that she sees herself as rather unworthy. Her previous life is shown to be melancholy, lonely and life-less. Here the image of the "defaced" viol symbolises this. Yet the instrument can yield beautiful music and we see this means she can be given new life. It is love that provides Barrett Browning with the hope for the future. The ending is joyful in the possibilities that this "master" can present.

The nature of ideal love

Once again the spiritual, soul-bonding nature of ideal love is referred to. The craftsman creates "great souls, at one stroke". For Barrett Browning, real love has wondrous depth. This notion that real love goes beyond the superficial is shown by her references to the soul beneath her broken shell.

The male dominance in love is also shown through the sonnet. Browning manages the love – whether you see it as successful or not. It is he who draws the notes from the viol, metaphorically forcing her spirit from her weak body.

Sonnet XXXII - Questions

1. Summarise this poem in FIVE points.
2. a. Describe the attitude of the persona towards her lover.
b. Discuss how this attitude reflects her self esteem and the patriarchal society she lived in.
3. a. Examine the structure of the sonnet. Summarise its features (ie. rhyme scheme, line stresses, line syllables, idea development)
b. How tightly is it organised?
4. Explain how the comparison of the persona with the viol is used to represent the ideas of the sonnet.
5. Choose THREE words used by the poet listed below and discuss why you think she has specifically chosen each.
 - loathe
 - snatched
 - ill-sounding
 - defaced
6. Think of another comparison which Barrett Browning might have used to represent her feelings about her unsuitability. Evaluate it in comparison to her use of the viol. Explain your comparison's effectiveness and limitations.